

Research Notes

# Le Court Film Unit: an award-winning disabled people's film crew 1958-1969



This first edition published in Great Britain in 2019 by  
TBR Imprint

Copyright © Tony Baldwinson, 2019

Tony Baldwinson asserts the moral right to be identified  
as the author of this work under the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Creative Commons



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons  
“Full Attribution, Non-Commercial, Share-Alike 3.0” License

ISBN 9781913148003

Also available online in PDF format and in large print  
26 Chapel Road, Sale, Manchester M33 7EG, UK

Front cover photo: Filming of Therasa Curtis

## Summary

Four disabled people set up their own film unit in the 1950s. They were originally living on open wards in a residential home in Hampshire, southern England, and they were interested in independent living. As part of their campaigning they made short films with minimal equipment and won international awards.

They called themselves the **Le Court Film Unit**, taking the name of the institution they were living in at the time, running the unit as a co-operative and making films from 1955 to 1968. All of the original film prints are stored in the British Film Institute (BFI) national film archive.

These short films were ground-breaking because they showed disabled people in control, and showing other disabled people how to liberate themselves from institutions to live full and independent lives. The messages included many practical suggestions, but also gave a political context. Barbara Beasley, the scriptwriter, publicised in her narrations the radical idea of disabled people living together as couples, and the strains and sometimes breakups in relationships and marriages when one of a couple becomes disabled.

### **At Home with Le Court, 1955**

The first film was made by a small group of residents and one staff: including

- Neville Thomas,
- Ann Hughes,
- Ted Sleaman, and
- Alan (Al) Finch, the warden.

It shows a typical day for residents of the institution and the move from an old house, shown being demolished, to a new building. A copy was held in the TSW Film and TV Archive, which in 1993 became the South West Film and TV Archive, SWFTA, based in Plymouth.

It was shown extensively by Leonard Cheshire during his fundraising talks, including a tour he made of India where the film was shown so often it became worn out. The film includes a segment on a visit by the Queen Mother to Le Court.

The film was made using the amateur format of 9.5mm, a short film, silent with a few captions, in both monochrome and colour segments, and with minimal editing. The amateur cameras were typically clockwork driven, also known as 'spring-wound.'

The 9.5mm film format wasn't suitable for most projectors. It was shot as silent at 16 frames a second, but the standard playback speed once audio had been added was 24 frames a second (25 frames a second if used for TV). People who were filmed walking looked silly when watched at the faster speed, but wheelchair users just looked more energetic.

### **The unit's core film crew**

The first film (At Home with Le Court) was well received by audiences and as a result in 1958 Neville and three other disabled residents became the core of the Le Court Film Unit, an informal co-operative. The four people were:

- Barbara Beasley (later: Lloyd-Evans) (scriptwriter, narrator, production office),
- Brian Line (sound, co-editor),
- Laurie Mawer (camera, lighting), and
- Neville Thomas (founder, producer / director, co-editor).

The co-editing was necessary because it involved a mixture of Neville Thomas doing the heavy lifting of reels of film, along with Brian Line doing the more intricate editing work. Brian Line also mentions Peggy Shiffner as a non-disabled helper (Line, 1982, p1 Chapter 11)

### **Living Proof, February 1962 (1961 in some catalogues)**

This was the unit's second film, the first made by the core crew. Unlike the previous film by Neville Thomas and others, the format was 16mm film using a basic camera. The film took four years to make.

After being shot, the exposed film was taken into the village to Boots' chemists for developing. Much of the unit's early work was helped by having its filming costs supported by some unofficial credit for their stock of film worth £70 from the local staff at Boots', on the basis that the unit would pay up before the periodic stock-take run by head office.

Ian K Curtis was living in the nearby small town of Liss, and he became involved with the unit. He is described as a Production Supervisor in the BBC staff list for 1966. Ian had previously been involved in the production of a BBC TV programme **Pathfinder** about the Cheshire Homes charity [undated].

His first piece of advice was to get rid of all the shots that were out of focus, which meant 20 minutes of raw filming needing to be thrown away. Ian Curtis also arranged for “his department” at the BBC to assist in adding soundtracks.

Brian Line described the Living Proof film as having “a simple sort of script, no shot directions or camera angles, or any fancy stuff, just simple notes on what we’d like to take.”



Barbara Beasley, scriptwriter (No Limit screenshot, captioned)

Barbara Beasley was the narrator, and she would travel in her wheelchair by train (probably in the unheated guard’s van sat beside all the luggage) from Liss in Hampshire to London to visit a BBC department to record the soundtracks. Her bedroom was also used by the unit as an editing suite.

Paul Hunt wrote a review of the film for the Cheshire Smile magazine in the Summer 1962 edition, pages 59 and 60. He doesn’t hold back, finding the clips on Farnborough Air Show “irrelevant” and some of the commentary “somewhat doctrinaire”. So his praise is all the more effective.

“For me, Living Proof goes a long way towards justifying an existence on a ‘liberal’ kind of organization for our communities. I am convinced of the intimate connection between the obvious happiness and vitality of the people in the film, and the various ‘privileges’ we have come to take for granted at Le Court. ... For the first time ever, probably, people with disabilities who are mainly on the receiving end of ‘charity’, have been able to show how things appear to them. They have presented to the world a picture of what being disabled looks like and feels like, **from the inside**, as it were.” (emphasis in original) Paul Hunt, 1962.

It was funded by jumble sales and dances including at the Town Hall in Petersfield organised by local friends of the members of the co-operative to cover its cost of £150. Living Proof was the first of their films to win an award – three stars – in the Amateur Cine World competition in 1962.

Brian Line remarked that winning this award “did more for our sense of achievement ... to go on making another film than anything else.”



Living Proof, title frame (screenshot from film)

## **No Limit, 1964**

“Given the tools, there is no limit to what disabled people can do.”

“There is an urgency in the drive to find new ways of doing things.”

“Disability is a challenge to society.”

These extracts from the narration in this film show a move by the members of the film unit become more radical in the content of their productions.

Around 1962 Mai Zetterling became the LCFU President. She was a celebrity film actor and director who lived nearby and knew Ian Curtis. Brian Line said that having her name on the headed notepaper helped, for example LCFU could get trade discounts.

This film was made at Le Court on 'gadgets' or equipment and adaptations that can help disabled people live independently. Its higher technical quality was made possible in 1962 when an American firm of professional camera makers, Bell & Howell Ltd, were persuaded by Mai Zetterling to donate a high-quality 16mm camera to the unit, which could also record audio. Although the camera was suited to a small crew, the same format was also used for larger-scale TV outside location work, continuing in use until professional-quality video tape equipment became available.

The film included a contemporary account of people building electric wheelchairs which had two motors, and had a fine touch-sensitive control, possibly the first of their type in the UK. Previously powered wheelchairs were designed like small three-wheel cars, with a single motor and a tiller bar to steer the front wheel. These could not be manoeuvred easily indoors and needed the disabled person to have strong arms and upper body to steer. Wheelchairs with twin motors could turn on their axis, and could be controlled by a lightweight joystick using a fingertip.

The film credits (in the narration) a group of volunteers called **Independence Unlimited** who are non-disabled engineers and similarly interested people who visited Le Court and help disabled people there design and create 'gadgets' for independent living such as powered door openers. The group included Clive Dunner, a founder member and a local car repair garage owner.

The film No Limit was awarded a Silver Cup at the International Rehabilitation Film Festival 1964 in Rome, organised by the International Federation of Disabled Workers and Civilian Handicapped.

As Brian Line later wrote, "Surprisingly we discovered that no films had previously been made about gadgets for the disabled – so that the two subsequent films, **Challenge**, and **Words without Hands**, were all about gadgetry." (Line, 1982, p1 Chapter 11)



The Le Court Film Unit members being presented with their new camera by their President, Mai Zetterling (in *Cheshire Smile*, Winter 1962, page 45)

### **Challenge, 1965**

This film was their third one, and the second film about 'gadgets' for independent living, with narration by Ronald Travers with comparisons between daily living tasks for disabled and non-disabled people.

For some sections of this film the unit visited the Daily Living Research Unit (DLRU) at what had previously been 'a polio unit' and known as the Mary Marlborough Lodge, then the Mary Marlborough Rehabilitation Centre, before becoming the DLRU. The building is now part of the Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital, in Headington, Oxford.



Sylvia, a disabled woman and wheelchair user, is filmed showing how she uses a self-controlled electric overhead hoist to transfer herself between her wheelchair and a toilet.



Filming Albert Baker, disabled painter, note the camera and tripod mounted on wheelchair arm (left)

(Picture: Leonard Cheshire Disability, Rewind archive)

Around this time the unit was contacted by a film distributor, the Concord Film Council Ltd, with a proposed 50:50 revenue share, which the unit accepted. According to the British Universities Film and Video Council website, the Concord Film Council was –

“Originally started as [an organization for the] 16mm film collection of material on the anti-nuclear weapon activities in Britain and elsewhere in the 1960s. The collection widened to include sociology, arts and general education ...”

This distribution deal could have been helped by Mai Zetterling, who in 1962 had directed the film **The War Game** on the threat of nuclear war.

## **A Spoonful of Sugar, 1968**

Brian Line also wrote that he “was filming for the programme, **A Spoonful of Sugar**, with the BBC in Stockholm”. (Line, 1982, p3 Chapter 14). This was a pre-recorded programme (24 minutes) which was transmitted nationally on BBC1 on 12 August 1968 at 6.40pm. It included Brian Line meeting with Mai Zetterling in Sweden (5 minutes), as well as about his journey getting there (1.5 minutes), with clips from an LCFU film (probably Challenge), and other interviews filmed in the UK with some Le Court residents.

## **Words without Hands, 1969**

This was the final film made by the unit’s core group and it highlighted some new methods of reading, writing and communicating that were being piloted by disabled people with high levels of impairment, such as adapted typewriters and page turners for books.

This film was narrated by Robert Robinson, and was financed with a commission from the wonderfully-named Writing and Reading Aids for the Paralysed committee, itself part of the National Fund for Research into Crippling Diseases.

This film was made with a professional camera operator and a heavier “lip sync” camera, the equipment generally having become too heavy and too fiddly for the unit members to use. At this time the unit members were also be drawn into new ventures, especially fundraising for new building work.

The cost of making the film was £275, contributed to by sponsorship from the Central Council for the Disabled, which had a Disabled Living Activities Group in the 1960s with Barbara Stow as its Director.

Brian Line later wrote how the unit disbanded.

“In 1969 when we decided to build a new west wing to Le Court, it resulted in all the members of the Film Unit taking on new work in the Home to help raise the £62,000 needed to build it. My colleagues were quite happy to give up film-making, as they felt they had gone as far as possible in producing films from a wheelchair. However, to my knowledge, we were the only film unit in the country run by the disabled for the disabled (sic) and therefore unique.”

(Line, 1982, p2 Chapter 11). [these days it would be: “disabled people”]

## **Maybe Today, 1973**

By this point the unit had stopped working as a group, and Brian Line had gone on to work as a professional film maker.

The first of these films was *Maybe Today*, a 'musical documentary' about the building of a new wing at Le Court. The music was written by Mike Cairns, a friend of Brian Line and a volunteer at Le Court, possibly on a social work course at Bedford College in London.

Mike Cairns introduced Brian Line to Monica Mazure, a student at the Royal College of Art, who was interested in being a co-director and had a disabled brother. She spoke with her tutor and organised a volunteer film crew of students and arranged a free loan of the film equipment from the art college. There was also an anonymous donation of £300. (Line, 1982, p1 Chapter 12)

Brian Line said later (in an interview in the documentary called, *People who Challenge*, 1979), that the rest of the former unit members had "mixed feelings" about his *Maybe Today* film. "It didn't go down too well."

But Brian wanted to continue.

"Following the success of *Maybe Today* I decided to go on making films. The problem, as always, was finance, so I approached Southern Arts, who gave me enough money to do the research and write the script for a new production about access for the disabled in society, using the new power wheelchairs." (Line, 1982, p1 Chapter 12)

## **Pebble Mill at One, Southern region ITV, undated**

There are unconfirmed reports that the *Maybe Today* film, or possibly a clip, was transmitted nationally on the BBC 1 television midday national programme from Birmingham, **Pebble Mill at One**, and by ITV in its Southern region.

## **I've Got Wheels, 1979**

From around 1978 Brian Line was working with Nick Dance, a student non-disabled film maker. Brian Line over time assembled film crews of typically four non-disabled people and made several films relating to Le Court and disabled people generally. Nick Dance was in his third and final year on a film course at West Surrey College of Art and initially was able to work with Brian

Line as a project as well as borrowing filming equipment from the college. Brian had met Nick through Mr K N Singh, a lecturer at the college.

This film concerned the relatively new idea of (electric) powered wheelchairs, and their use by disabled people to access buildings in a town centre.

To save money this production was made on videotape rather than on film, and the equipment was borrowed from Portsmouth Polytechnic, now the University of Portsmouth. However, the videotape machinery was much more cumbersome than film equipment, and more difficult to edit.

“On the other hand, I found it nice to be able to see what was being shot on a monitor TV on location. Another advantage was that we were able to view rushes (the day’s results) ... in the evening ... rather than having to wait a week [as with film].” (Line, 1982, p2 Chapter 12)

The title, I’ve Got Wheels, came from a song by a group called Scarlet and Lace that had been written by Brian’s friend Mike Cairns. The shooting was over five days in April (one day was lost to bad weather), with letters in advance to the council and the police to get highways filming permissions, as well as private property owner’s permissions for a cinema and a Marks and Spencer store. Cathy [no surname] assisted Brian Line in this administration.

The crew was five people comprising Nick Dance on camera, another student on sound, a college video technician, Brian Line, and his PA from Le Court. The total tape length was six hours of shooting, to be edited mostly by Nick Dance to 20 minutes.

The Le Court management committee planned to use the film for fundraising and for staff training. One report suggested that Southern Arts didn’t consider the final film to be sufficiently artistic, so the funds were apparently returned and alternative funds raised.

### **People who Challenge, 1979 (art college-made documentary)**

Sometimes with its title abbreviated to just ‘Challenge,’ (confusingly with the 1965 film of that short name), this 29 minute film was an interview of Brian Line by Robert Robinson, with clips from previous films. The film end-credit is to West Surrey College of Art.

An 11-page document with an audio transcript of this programme is available online, produced as part of the Rewind project for assembling the archives of Leonard Cheshire Disability funded by the National Lottery.



Brian Line (left) and Nick Dance

(Picture: Leonard Cheshire Disability, Rewind archive)

### **It Could Happen to You, 1981**

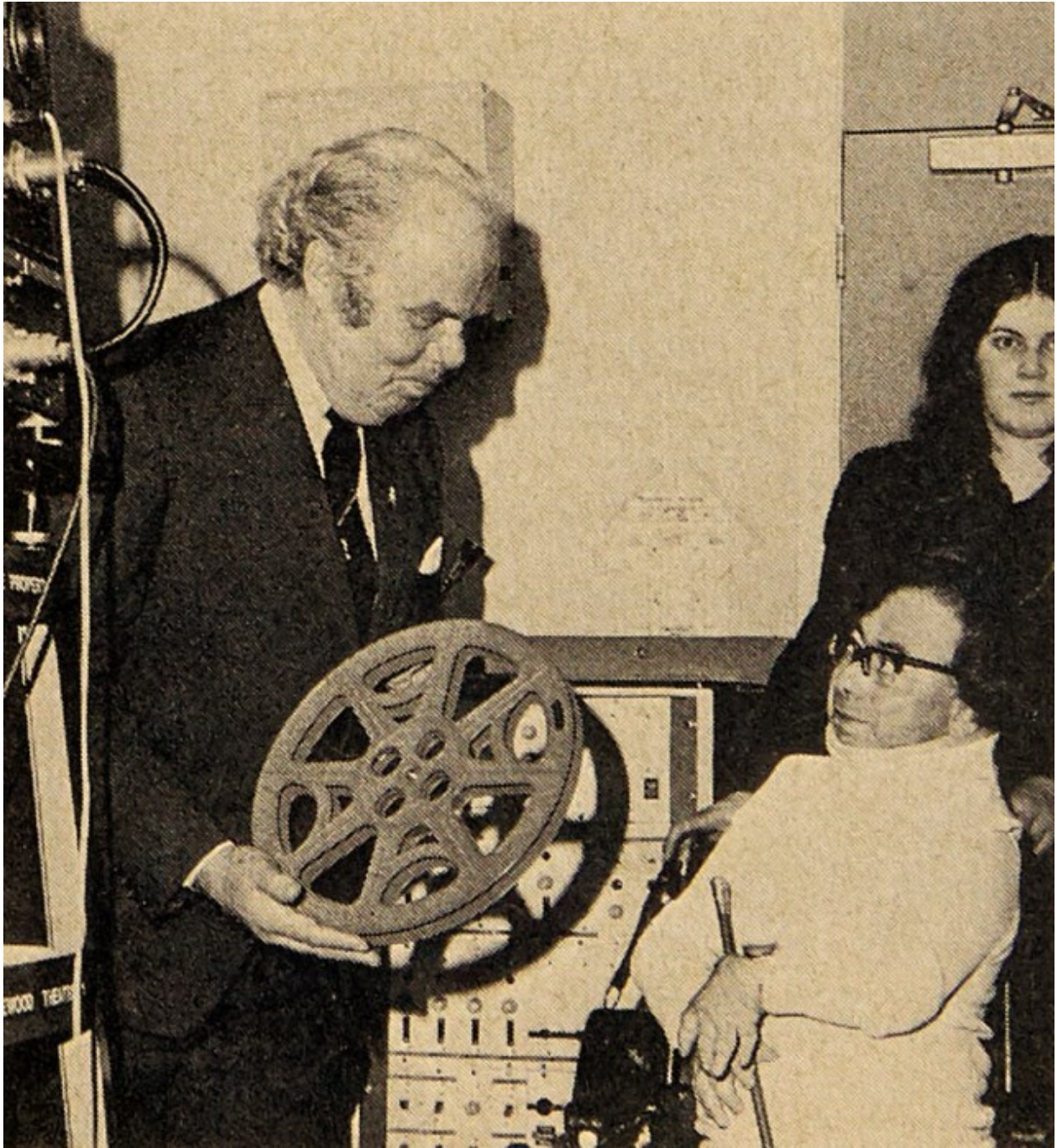
This 40 minute film was made for the International Year of Disabled People, 1981, and premiered at the Shell Centre's company film theatre in central London with Lord Snowden on 4 March 1981. The working title for the film was, Production 81.

With the help of a local volunteer, Marion [no surname], Brian Line wrote around 200 letters to companies asking for donations towards the production costs, and they raised enough cash plus free film from Kodak and free processing and print-making from Rank. The film was a series of interviews with disabled people about their lives. It was shot in a long week in August 1980, at first in Bristol for three days with two cars for transport, a large yellow taxi on loan for all the crew, and a smaller car for all the equipment.

The next two days filming were at Stoke Mandeville Hospital which specialised in helping people with spinal injuries, followed by a day in Thrupton and another two in Salisbury. The schedule in Salisbury had needed to be extended because a powered wheelchair had broken down.

The shooting days were long for the crew, but by far the longest for Brian Line's PA, and he decided that he would need two PAs if he ever went on location again, so they could work a shorter shift each.

The film was broadcast on BBC TV South on 5 June 1981, arranged by John Frost and edited to 30 minutes running time. (Line, 1982, Chapters 18 and 19)



(Brian Line, seated, in Cheshire Smile, Summer 1974, page 17)

## Filmography

1. \* **At Home with Le Court**, 1955, 9.5mm, silent, monochrome.
2. \* **Living Proof**, 1961, 16mm, narrated, colour, 25min.  
(Award: Three Stars, Amateur Cine World magazine competition, 1962)
3. \* **No Limit**, 1964, 16mm, narrated, 20min.  
(Award: Silver Cup, Rehabilitation Film Festival, Rome, 1964)
4. \* **Challenge**, 1965, 16mm, narrated, 25min.
5. \* **Words without Hands**, 1969, 16mm, narrated by Robert Robinson, 16 min.

And after LCFU, by Brian Line with Nick Dance:

6. \* **Maybe Today**, 1973, musical documentary with Frank Hennig, 12min.  
Broadcast on BBC TV, **Pebble Mill at One**, and by ITV in its Southern region.
7. \* **I've Got Wheels**, 1979, 19min.
8. \* **People who Challenge**, 1979, 29min, written and directed by Nick Dance, an interview of Brian Line by Robert Robinson with clips, hosted on YouTube and accessible via LCD Rewind archive website.
9. \* **It Could Happen to You**, 1981, 40min.  
Made for the International Year of Disabled People, 1981, and premiered at the Shell Centre's company film theatre in central London with Lord Snowden (4 March 1981). The working title was, Production 81. Later broadcast on BBC 1 in the Southern regional opt-out (5 June 1981), edited to 30 minutes.

**Digital copies** of many of the earlier films, including captioned versions, are available online within the **Rewind** archive website, and some are also available directly on YouTube. Some are viewable only through the **BFI website**.

\* These film as original prints are held in the BFI National Archive (British Film Institute).



## Other References

Brian Line, **The Long Journey**, c.1982, unpublished, autobiography typescript with redacted names, held at LCD Archive, Derbyshire.

**Cheshire Smile**, newsletter of LCD, online and held at LCD Archive, Derbyshire.

Audio 11-page transcript of the film, **People who Challenge**, online at Rewind, the LCD Archive, Derbyshire.

BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading RG4 8TZ.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are especially due to:

John Evans

Linda Marsh

Stephanie Nield

Louise North

## Background notes:

### Disability and politics

From the 1950s onwards many of the disabled residents at Le Court didn't like living in the institution and they wanted to live independently in the community, a radical idea at the time. For reasons which the institution's managers and trustees never really could understand, Le Court turned out to be a hotbed of radicalism for many of the residents. Paul Hunt was a founder of UPIAS (the **Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation**) with his campaigning letter published in The Guardian national newspaper in 1972 and the subsequent development of the **social model** of disability. Laurie Mawer was also an early member of UPIAS. The social model thinking from UPIAS still underpins the disabled people's movement in the UK today.

Other disabled people living there included John Evans, a leading light in the independent living movement internationally as well as in the UK, and with Philip Mason leading the pioneering **Project 81** scheme for independent living, nicknamed "the escape committee" by Ian Drury, plus establishing Hampshire **Centre for Independent Living**, a pioneer organisation for the CIL movement in the UK along with Derbyshire CIL.

### Leonard Cheshire

The Le Court 'home' or institution was run by the Leonard Cheshire Foundation, later called Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD). The residential institution was founded after the Second World War by Group Captain Leonard Cheshire (1917-1992), a philanthropist who had been an airman who fought in the war and was on board an observer plane for the dropping of an atomic bomb on people in Nagasaki, Japan in 1945.

### Rewind archive project

Around 2015 Leonard Cheshire Disability gained a National Lottery grant for their archives project, called Rewind, which has now finished its initial work. The LCFU was briefly written about as part of this project, and the original film prints are now held in the British Film Institute (BFI) national film archive. The Rewind project also added open captioning to the digital versions of the LCFU films.

As part of Rewind, in 2016 LCD organised a recording with Nick Dance as an oral history to find out more about his experiences of working with Brian Line and his visits to Le Court.

<https://rewind.leonardcheshire.org/object/archive-oral-histories-nick-dance/>

The Rewind archive is of items (other than film, held at BFI) spanning the first 70 years of LCD. It is located in Derbyshire at Newlands House, DE12 8DA.

### **Disabled Living Foundation**

The Central Council for the Disabled sponsored another film, **Matter of Opportunity**, made in 1966 with Richard Baker as the narrator. It was made by the Photographic Department of the Royal Society of Medicine, and is now kept in the BFI national film archive.

In the mid-1960s the Central Council for the Disabled reportedly appointed England's first access officer "to promote the idea that buildings should be accessible to wheelchair users." It was founded in 1919 as the Central Council for the Care of Cripples; and in 1984 became the Disabled Living Foundation (DLF), which is not an organisation controlled by disabled people.

### **Digitised copies**

Some years later, after Laurie Mawer had died, his partner Martha Leat forwarded some digitised copies of the unit's films to Judy Hunt, who in turn passed them on to the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP).

### **Further research**

Any further details including corrections are very welcome. This pamphlet is very much a work in progress.

Tony Baldwinson

Manchester, March 2019

v14

## Le Court Film Unit

### How it all began

The Le Court Film Unit started about 18 years ago when one resident, Neville Thomas, made a black and white 9.5 film about Le Court. It was virtually unedited and had no sound track, but it had a compulsion of its own. This film disappeared on one of Group Captain Cheshire's visits to India.

In 1958 four of the residents, including Neville Thomas, formed a co-operative film unit. All are in wheelchairs and have impaired hands. Each did several jobs. This was completely self-supporting and independent except for the invaluable help of a BBC documentary producer who acted as Adviser. The first film, *Living Proof*, took four years to make, was financed by jumble sales and dances, cost £150, and won a three star award in the Amateur Cine World competition in 1962.

This film gives a vivid picture of life in the original Cheshire Home, Le Court. While not perfect technically, its warmth and humanity make it attractive to any audience. Three star award, Amateur Cine World Competition, 1962. Colour. 25 minutes. Rental £1.45.

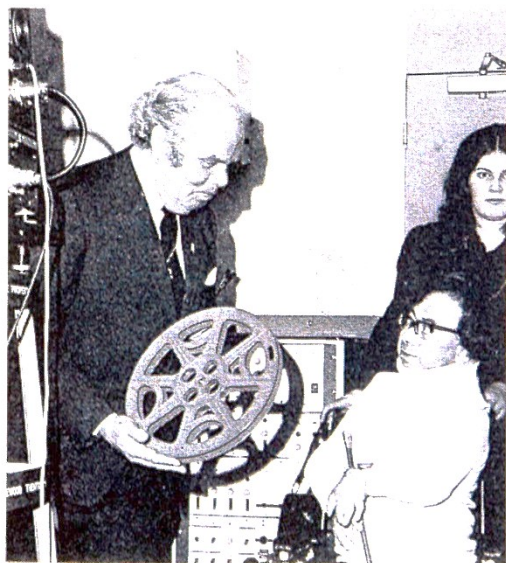
The second film, *No Limit*, costing £275 was financed by a charitable foundation. The Unit had gained enough expertise to win it a silver cup at the International Film Festival on Rehabilitation in Rome in 1964. The quality of the colour was infinitely better. A 16mm camera had been donated, and the members were much more confident about camera work, editing, commentary

writing and sound editing. It is about some of the specialised gadgets evolved at Le Court to solve individual problems. The gadgets were designed and made by voluntary helpers. Awarded silver cup, International Film Festival on Rehabilitation, Rome, 1964. Colour. 20 minutes. Rental £1.45.

Surprisingly no films had previously been made about gadgets for disabled people, so *No Limit* and the two subsequent films, *Challenge* and *Words Without Hands*, were all about gadgetry. This seemed the only subject the Film Unit could usefully exploit. *Challenge* contrasts the ease with which members of an ordinary family eat, drink, wash, shave, make up and move about, with the ingenuity necessary for disabled people to do the same things. Gadgets and techniques, some simple, some complex. Colour. 25 minutes. Rental £1.25. While *Words Without Hands*, commissioned by the Writing and Reading Aids for the Paralysed Committee of the National Fund for Research into Crippling Diseases is Not unexpectedly, about writing and reading aids. Narrator, Robert Robinson. Colour. 16 minutes. Rental £1.20.

The building of the new West Wing at Le Court provided Brian Line, one of the other members, with a unique opportunity to make *Maybe Today*. A documentary with music about a community's search for individual privacy, and the building of a new wing of 18 single rooms at Le Court to achieve it. Commentary by Frank Hennig. Colour. 12 minutes. Rental £1.20.

Further information from Brian Line at Le Court, Liss, Hants.



## Mote House Cheshire Home

On 10th November the residents with the help of the House Committee ran a coffee morning for the Cheshire Home in Manila, the attendance was staggering, and it gave us great pleasure in sending a cheque for £100 to this Home.

### Mayfayre, 11th May

This is always a big day for us, and this year we welcomed Sheila Hancock and her daughter, they both endeared themselves to all residents and public. Our big draw made a record profit of £728.

Maurice Byass

17

Extract from Cheshire Smile, Summer 1974, page 17